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John Downey: Content After 21 Years in Jail

By Frank Schumer
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BOSTON—To look at John T. Downey is to wonder how 21 years of prison in China could have left so little a mark on this vigorous and gentle-mannered man.

At 43, Downey is robust and alert—very much an older version of the football star and wrestling team captain he was during his undergraduate days at Yale. There is still the impish grin and congenial appearance that his classmates at Choate must have noticed when they voted him "most popular, most versatile and most likely to succeed."

With his vogueish, wire-rimmed glasses and his fashionably long hair, Downey appears never to have stepped out of the mainstream of American society. Only his gray flannel, cuffed slacks and his button-down Oxford shirt, reminiscent of the Ivy Leaguer's uniform of a past era, betray Downey's incongruous fit with the present.

In his spacious Cambridge apartment, barren except for newspaper and legal texts strewn about, Downey sits back, props his feet up on his desk, and asks the question that has baffled him most since his return:

"Why does everyone want to make such a fuss over me? You know, I get letters from people asking me what I think about America after being away for 21 years. But I'm no expert. My opinions don't deserve any special attention. I don't want to be put on a pedestal."



JOHN DOWNEY
... robust and alert

With a quick wave of his hand, Downey brushes aside the 21 years he spent in prison as a "pretty boring time." Sometimes he was lonely, sometimes frightened, but he was sustained by his unflagging belief that someday he would be released.

"In my heart, I always—well, nearly always—knew I'd get out," he said. "I just had a hunch I'd return."

Avoiding attention wherever possible, Downey spends most of his time "scrambling to keep up with all this work" at law school.

As for friends, Jack Downey never did find it difficult to mix. He thinks his classmates are "a great bunch of people." He drinks with them, mingles with them and even plays football on the Law School team with his classmates, most of whom are young enough to be his children.

Downey does not think he will follow the star-studded path to Washington or Wall Street that many Harvard law students pursue. "It would take too much time to build up a career like that," he said. Jack Downey does not have that time to spend.

If there were opportunities lost, career options closed to him during the years he was away, Downey is neither concerned with dwelling upon them or casting any judgments on anyone. Instead, he has oriented himself to the present, happy to pick up the pieces of his fragmented career and start from scratch.

"I'm really pretty content with my life now," he said. "Gosh, when I think of some of the business problems or troubles supporting a family that men my age have, I feel as free as a bird."

As an honor student at Yale, Downey had a world of opportunities open to him. In his senior year, he had decided to follow the legal career of his father, a probate judge in Wallingford, Conn., who died in an automobile crash when Downey was six. But when a CIA recruiter approached Downey in the spring of his senior year, it seemed that a post with the CIA was "a good way to keep my options open."

His options were abruptly closed when his plane was captured flying over Manchuria on Nov. 29, 1952.

Although Downey refuses to discuss precisely what his mission in China was, Thomas B. Ross, a classmate of Downey's at Yale and co-author of a study of the CIA, said Downey was a trainer of agents to be dropped into China with radio equipment to monitor conversations between nearby airfields and Mig pilots fighting in Korea.

When his team of agents was captured in early November, Downey—assisted by Richard G. Fecteau of Lynn, Mass.—led a mission to rescue the agents. When their plane encircled the area in search of the captured agents, the Chinese were waiting for them. Downey was sentenced to life imprisonment on espionage charges and Fecteau, who

was released in 1972, was sentenced to 20 years.

Life in prison for Downey was a regimented schedule of activities that varied little over the 21 years. Downey says his days began at 6 or 6:30, when he was awakened, given his meals and allowed to take daily exercise. The prisoners were schooled in "ideological studies" which Downey said he "would prefer not to go into," and were allowed to read selected American periodicals.

From newspaper clippings, the letters from home that the prisoners were permitted to receive and radio broadcasts, Downey said he kept in touch with events at home. "I think I was better informed about things going on in America then than I am now—especially sports. They gave us all kinds of sports articles to read," he said.

A former English major with an appetite for literature and language, Downey was fed on a steady diet of English and American novels. In prison, he taught himself to speak Russian, French and a little Chinese.

His only companions were, from time to time, other American prisoners and the Chinese prison guards. His mother, Mrs. May V. Downey, a school teacher in New Britain, Conn., and his younger brother, William, a New York lawyer, were allowed to visit Downey five times over the 21 years.)

During the lonely hours, Downey would indulge his homesickness and dream about his carefree undergraduate days at Yale. "You know how it is when you're away. The good things seem to grow bigger and the bad things disappear," he said.

In December, 1971, Downey's prison sentence was reduced to 25 years—a move Downey attributes to President Nixon's impending visit and the Sino-American thaw. He was released four years before his 25-year sentence expired. According to Downey, his release was updated because of his mother's sudden illness.

Some of Downey's friends dispute his interpretation of the circumstances leading to his release. Steven Kiba, a U.S. pilot who was in prison with Downey, said earlier this year that the Chinese would have released Downey sooner if the United States had admitted he was a CIA agent. Jerome A. Cohen, a former classmate at Yale and a professor at Harvard Law School, said the government's repeated denial of Downey's involvement with the CIA was the worst possible tactic.

Downey refuses to comment on this explanation, although he is careful to point out that he is "not under any special orders of secrecy by the government."

During Downey's imprisonment, the U.S. government insisted that he and Fecteau were civilian employees of the army whose plane was downed when it strayed off course during a flight from Korea to Japan. President Nixon first mentioned Downey's link with the CIA at a press conference in January, 1973, two weeks before Downey was released.

When he came home, he found that the 21 years had brought success to many of his former friends and classmates. Thomas J. Meskill, his next-door neighbor in New Britain, had become the governor of his home state. Jerome A. Cohen, a college classmate, had established himself as a prominent expert on legal matters at Harvard Law School. Downey's younger brother William was a successful New York attorney with a wife and family.

If someone could give Downey back the years he lost in a Chinese prison, would he aim for the honor and prestigious positions his old friends achieved?

Downey doesn't think so.